



History and Recovery Efforts of the USS California (BB-44)

At approximately 0755 hours on the morning of 7 December 1941, a fleet of Japanese aircraft carriers launched an air strike against the U.S. Pacific Fleet based at Pearl Harbor, on the island of Oahu, Territory of Hawaii (see Figure 1). The surprise attack inflicted serious damage on the ships anchored at "Battleship Row" and thrust the United States into World War II. On Sunday morning, December 7, the battleship USS California (BB-44) occupied berth F-3, somewhat removed and isolated from the other capital ships moored at "Battleship Row" off Ford Island (see Figure 2).

In the first attack by enemy planes, two torpedoes struck the port side of the California and caused damage that was later judged as "far-reaching and disastrous." Underwater protection against such attacks failed and water poured into the lower compartments of the battleship causing an immediate list to port. The crew of the California promptly reported to their battle stations and opened fire with 50-caliber machine guns and 5-inch anti-aircraft guns. The topside gunners, however, soon encountered an acute shortage of ammunition as the hoists that carried shells from below deck were without power after the first explosions. Officers ordered counterflooding to combat the list, but at 0845 hours, California was attacked by a second wave of Japanese planes. Several bombs landed near the ship and buckled underwater compartments, causing additional flooding. One bomb penetrated the main deck amidships and exploded inside the battleship, starting a fire that burned out of control due to a loss of water pressure and a lack of fire extinguishers. The crew were forced to abandon California when burning oil from "Battleship Row" threatened to further engulf the ship, but they retrieved firefighting equipment from Ford Island and returned to save the ship, now listing to 8 degrees (see Figure). The USS California eventually settled in shallow water but was refloated in 1942 to join the war effort. Initial casualty figures from the attack on Pearl Harbor included 5 officers and 48 enlisted men killed. 45 crewmen were missing.

Search and Recovery

The recovery and burial of the dead— some tentatively identified and many that remained unidentified—began almost immediately. Within days of the attack, naval personnel had interred 51 sets of remains associated with California in one of two cemeteries on the island of Oahu: Nu'uuanu Cemetery, a municipal cemetery with a section for deceased Sailors, and Halawa Naval Cemetery, which was hastily established



in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack. A second spate of recoveries and burials took place in March 1942 during the mammoth effort to refloat and salvage the ship (see Figure 4). As workers pumped water and fuel from the second and third decks, they encountered a number of bodies. According to the officer in charge of salvage operations at Pearl Harbor, recovered bodies were floated and secured in bags when the decks of sunken ships were pumped free of water. The remains were then transported to the Naval Hospital at Aiea for correct identification and burial.

After World War II ended, the War Department assigned the American Graves Registration Service (AGRS), U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps, the responsibility of recovering and identifying the remains of deceased U.S. personnel in the Pacific Theater. In August and September of 1947, AGRS personnel exhumed the remains from the Halawa and Nu'uuanu cemeteries and transferred them to the Schofield Barracks Central Identification Laboratory (CIL), also located on Oahu. The laboratory staff worked to confirm the identities of those buried with name associations and to make additional identifications from those who had been initially interred as unknowns. This involved separating commingled remains into specific individuals. Ultimately, officials approved the identifications of 82 crewmen from USS California, and classified the remains of 20 Sailors as "non-recoverable."

After analyzing and processing the remains of the California casualties, officials failed to make positive identifications on 25 sets of remains potentially associated with the battleship. Several factors may be responsible for the discrepancy between the number of missing crewmen and the number of unknowns. Laboratory officials may not have segregated the unknowns correctly or the remains of a single individual may have been divided into two or more unknowns when army personnel casketed the 25 unknowns and interred them in individual graves at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific (NMCP), in March 1949.

In 2015, the Deputy Secretary of Defense issued a policy memorandum directing the disinterment of unknowns associated with the USS Oklahoma. This memorandum established standards to be met in pursuit of other disinterment efforts for unknowns from World War II and the Korean War who are currently buried in our national memorial cemeteries, including the unknowns associated with the USS California. The memorandum established that all available medical and historical records and DNA reference samples must be collected for a disinterment to be approved. It also imposed a threshold for cases of commingled remains, for which research must indicate that at least 60 percent of the Service members associated with the group can be individually identified.



The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency



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In March 2018, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) personnel, in cooperation with cemetery officials, exhumed the last three of the 25 unknowns associated the USS California and transported them to one of two DPAA laboratories located at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, and Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska. Laboratory personnel are in the process of analyzing each of the unknowns.

Next Steps

Over the next five years, laboratory personnel will perform additional forensic analysis and DNA testing in order to identify as many of the remaining unresolved USS California crew members as possible. Individual identifications will occur throughout that five-year period and families will receive notifications as those identifications are accomplished and approved.



Figure 1. Google Earth image of Oahu, Hawaii. The East Loch of Pearl Harbor and Ford Island, as indicated by the red arrow.

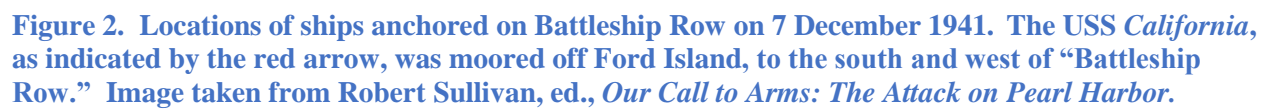




Figure 3. The crew abandoning the listing USS California, as burning fuel on the surface of the water began to envelop the ship. Image from the Naval History and Heritage Command (NH 97399).



Figure 4. USS *California* after it was refloated, March 1942. Image from Naval History and Heritage Command (NH 55036).